Our latest opponent spring football preview takes a look at Stanford. David Shaw and the Cardinal barely missed a beat in 2012 after losing Heisman Trophy runner-up Andrew Luck, who was the overall number one pick in last year's NFL draft.

The biggest question that would seem to face Shaw and his staff is whether or not they can sustain the success with each passing year that separates Stanford from Jim Harbaugh - who got the ball rolling in Palo Alto before taking over the San Francisco 49ers. We turned to David Fowkes of KGO Radio for insight into Stanford's losses and needs heading into this spring's practices.

Defense

The defense loses four starters from last season's Rose Bowl winning team. Nose guard Terrence Stephens, cornerback Terrance Brown and outside linebacker Chase Thomas are all gone. Brown leaves Stanford for the NFL with a year of eligibility remaining. His departure caught some in Palo Alto by surprise, but his loss should not result in a dire impact on the defense, because of the depth the Cardinal has at corner after rotating four players at the two spots throughout 2012.

Stephens started the first nine games of 2012, but had to sit the last three games, including the Rose Bowl win over Wisconsin, due to an NCAA infraction concerning his housing. David Parry started in Stephens' absence and Fowkes expects the starting job to belong to the 6'2, 300 pound former walk-on next season.

"He had a great game in the Rose Bowl," Fowkes said of Parry. "I don't think there's any doubt that he'll be the starter. The competition will clearly be at depth behind him, and there should be some great competition in the second-tier of that defensive line for jobs."

Stanford is versatile in its defensive sets with its nose guards anyway. They used just two defensive linemen against spread teams like Oregon.

The void left by Thomas though is the biggest defensive question mark Stanford has heading into spring practice. Thomas' 71 tackles and 7.5 sacks were the second-most by a Stanford defender last season.

"They're talking about a redshirt freshman, Noor Davis," Fowkes said of the top candidate to fill Thomas' shoes. "He was a very highly recruited outside linebacker last year. They say he's ready to step in. The focus will shift to the other side, where Trent Murphy is returning for his fifth year. He could have left early. He's expected to sort of be 'that standout', but they're going to need someone off the depth chart to step up."

Murphy finished 2012 with 51 tackles and a team-high 10.0 sacks. Depth at outside linebacker will be thin as well, because Alex Debniak, whom Fowkes described as a 'high motor guy', has also graduated.

Stanford's overall defense should not see much drop-off from its stellar 2012 season. A total of 17 of 21 contributors on that side of the ball will be back in 2013.

Offense

While the Cardinal has experience in numbers coming back defensively, the same can not be said of the offense. The most glaring departures are at tight end, where 6'6" Zach Ertz and 6'8" Levine Toilolo are both NFL bound.

Ertz led Stanford with 69 receptions, 898 yards and six touchdown catches. Toilolo added 24 catches for 393 yards and four TDs.

"There's a real void at tight end," Fowkes began. "Do a couple of the young guys step-up? Does Ryan Hewitt, who was recruited as a tight end but moved to fullback, get in the rotation at tight end? Do new recruits get in the mix? Tight end is probably the number one question right now."

Stanford also loses receivers Drew Terrell (33 receptions for 463 yards and four touchdowns) and Jamal-Rahad Patterson (16 receptions, 271 yards and two touchdowns).

"Who steps-up in the receiving corps, whether it's a wide receiver or tight end, to me that's the number one question heading into the spring and next season," Fowkes proclaimed.

That is a bold statement, considering Stanford also loses the program's all-time leading rusher - Stepfan Taylor. The Texas native rushed for 1,530 yards and 13 touchdowns in 2012 and ended his career with 4,212 yards and 70 rushing TDs. He was also a versatile back, who had 94 career receptions for 761 yards and five more touchdowns.

"Normally you would say that's a huge loss, but Stanford lost Toby Gerhart and everyone thought the world was coming to an end," Fowkes explained. "Filling those shoes will be tough, but at the same time they've got some tremendous talent coming up."

Sophomore Kelsey Young, who has played both receiver and running back, Anthony Wilkerson, Remound Wright, and Barry Sanders (the son of the Hall of Famer) will all be in the mix in the backfield this spring.

The offensive line also loses center Sam Schwartzstein. The other four starters on the offensive line return for 2013.

Coaching Staff

In addition to the significant skill position losses Stanford has on offense, the Cardinal will also have a new offensive coordinator in 2013. Former "Andrew Luck Director of Offense/Offensive Coordinator Pep Hamilton has left Stanford to reunite with Andrew Luck as the Indianapolis Colts' Offensive Coordinator.

Cardinal head coach David Shaw has promoted Mike Bloomgren to takeover for Hamilton. Bloomgren spent the last two seasons as Stanford's run-game coordinator and offensive line coach.

"He was the only choice," Shaw said of the decision to promote Bloomgren. "We didn't interview anybody else and we didn't want to interview anybody else."

Shaw also moved Mike Sanford, who coached the running backs last season, to quarterbacks and wide receivers coach, while former QB coach Tavita Pritchard will now coach Stanford's running backs.

Special Teams

Terrell handled Stanford's punt return duties in 2012 and his replacement will be an emphasis this spring. Terrell averaged 12.1 yards on 24 returns, including a touchdown, last season.

Punter Daniel Zychlinski must also be replaced. Zychlinski averaged 43.1 yards on 66 punts. He had seven touchbacks and pinned opponents inside their 20-yard line 26 times. He was also the team's field goal and extra point holder.